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Chairman: Mr. SZARKA (Hungary)

Rapporteur: Mr. CASTALDO (Italy)

- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
  - (a) Report of the Commissioner-General
  - (b) Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
  - (c) Report of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine
  - (d) Reports of the Secretary-General
- Statements by:

  Sir John Rennie (Commissioner-General, UNRWA)

  Mr. Arvesen (Norway), Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA

  Mr. Olcay (Turkey), Chairman of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA

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AGENDA ITEM 43

UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST (A/9013, A/9155, A/9156, A/9187, A/9231):

(a) REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONER-GENERAL;

(b) REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE FINANCING OF THE UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST;

(c) REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONCILIATION COMMISSION FOR PALESTINE;

(d) REPORTS OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL.

Sir John RENNIE (Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me this opportunity to present my report as Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. My report covers the period 1 July 1972 to 30 June 1973 and was, of course, written before war broke out on 6 October 1973. I should therefore begin by letting the Committee have such information as is available to me on the effects of the war on the Palestine refugees registered with the Agency and on the Agency's operations.

So far the Agency has been notified of eight refugees killed and 12 injured among the civilian casualties, all of them in Syria and most of them in Sbeineh camp on the outskirts of Damascus. One refugee camp, Khan Esh Shieh, between Damascus and Kuneitra, had to be evacuated by the 7,000 refugees residing in it, but they are now beginning to return. About 700 refugees have been displaced from Sasa Village and have taken shelter with relatives and friends, mainly in camps in the Damascus area. I have no figures for displaced Syrian citizens, who are being cared for by the Syrian authorities, as they were in 1967. UNRWA's assistance has not been sought, but if there is any help our services can give we shall, of course, be ready to co-operate with the Government to the best of our ability. I should explain that no Palestine refugees remained in the Golan Heights after their occupation by Israel in 1967 and that the Agency does not operate there or in occupied Sinai or in Egypt.

(Sir John Rennie, Commissioner-General of UNRWA)

With regard to damage to Agency installations, both the central warehouse and the vocational training centre in the vicinity of Damascus were hit and a provisional estimate of the cost of repairs is $25,000. Despite the outbreak of war, a ration distribution of about 95 per cent was carried out in Syria in October and health services were maintained, but schools were closed. Fortunately, communication between Beirut and Damascus by telephone was almost always possible and the Agency's Field Director in Damascus reported daily, and paid one visit to headquarters. I might mention here that the restoration of the separate post of Field Director for Syria, referred to in paragraph 19 of the report, proved of great benefit in this crisis.

In fields other than Syria, services were maintained throughout the war, with the exception of some interruption of education through the temporary closure of schools.

Delay in the shipment of supplies for basic rations had already caused problems this year and they were aggravated by the diversion of shipping from Aqaba and Ashod and the off-loading of flour at other ports. Apart from the delay in delivery, extra transport costs to the Agency of the order of $100,000 have been incurred. The local borrowing of flour and its replacement by wheat to maintain West Bank ration distribution will add from $40,000 to $50,000 to costs, and a rise in fuel prices by 40 per cent will increase annual expenditures by about $100,000. The further delay in shipping caused by the war will prolong the reduced issue of sugar in all fields of our operation, and in East Jordan shortage of flour and oil will reduce issues in November and possibly in December also.

To turn now to the report before the Committee in document A/9013, I have sought to give in it an account of the Agency's operations between 1 July 1972 and 30 June 1973, with an indication of the conditions in which they were carried out, and to pay special attention to matters which have been the subject of resolutions of the General Assembly.

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I hope the report brings out adequately the scale and range of the Agency's activities. There are three main programmes: relief, health and education. The main activity of the relief programme is the distribution of a basic ration of flour, cooking oil, rice and sugar amounting to 1,500 calories a day in the summer and 1,600 in winter, to about 820,000 persons. It has been possible to maintain supplementary feeding for small children and other vulnerable groups by means of a special contribution in cash and in kind, but rising prices for local foodstuffs are impoverishing the content of the hot meals included in this activity.

The health programme concentrates on preventive medicine through environmental health measures such as sanitation in camps and a network of clinics that place special emphasis on maternal and child welfare. With two exceptions, hospital treatment is provided in governmental or private institutions, with which arrangements are made by the Agency. Once again, despite overcrowding in many camps and poor living conditions for refugees outside camps, there was no major epidemic, a state of affairs for which the health programme may take some credit.

The education programme is now the largest programme absorbing about 48 per cent of the total budget of $63 million in 1973 and an even higher percentage of cash income, since basic rations are all donated in kind. The school population is growing at the rate of 12,000 children a year. The number of teachers, virtually all Palestine refugees, exceeds 7,000, and places in vocational, technical and teaching-training centres exceed 4,000, of which just over a quarter offer teacher-training.

In connexion with the education programme, I would invite the attention of the Committee to the development of the work of the UNRWA/UNESCO Institute of Education as an example of inter-agency co-operation. It is referred to in paragraph 35 of the introduction and described more fully in paragraph 166 of the report (A/9013). These extension services to government ministries of education cost the Agency nothing, and the Institute still provides its usual services to the Palestine refugees. Almost the entire cost of the Institute is now met by special contributions, as the Institute's extension work has

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justified a UNDP project for which UNESCO is the executing agency and UNRWA is sub-contractor and which provides funds to supplement the continuing contribution from UNESCO and the Swiss Government.

These extension services could not be provided otherwise than through the UNRWA/UNESCO Institute of Education, since they depend on the existence of a programme of in-service training within a school system which can be observed and used as an illustration and model. The Agency welcomes this co-operation with three other United Nations organizations, UNESCO, UNDP and UNICEF, and also the opportunity it has afforded to make more widely known the scope and the achievements of the UNRWA/UNESCO education programme for the Palestine refugees.

With regard to the conditions in which UNRWA's operations have been carried on during the year of the report, they have again been characterized by periods of strain, tension and even fighting. In a foot-note to the section on camps, on page 18 of the report, I have invited attention to paragraphs of a previous report in which the origin and the nature of the Palestine refugee camps and UNRWA's relationship and limited responsibilities towards them are explained. I would only repeat here that about 60 per cent of the refugees live outside camps and that UNRWA has no police or comparable administrative functions in regard to the camps. There are, I find, many misconceptions about the Palestine refugee camps. May I say, therefore, that they are not surrounded by barbed wire, that they are not under perpetual curfew, that the refugees can normally enter or leave them at will.

There have been repeated resolutions calling for the return of those refugees and also other persons who were displaced in 1967 from the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. This matter has been the subject of a report by the Secretary-General, in document A/9756, and is also dealt with in paragraph 4 of my report. In case there should be any misunderstanding of the last sentence of that paragraph, I should like to make clear that when I refer to refugees who have been allowed "to return for residence", I mean that they have been able to exercise their right to return, not under paragraph 11 of resolution 184 (III) to Israel but under resolution 2252 (ES-V) of 4 July 1967 and other resolutions to the same effect, to the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. No refugees, so far as I know, have returned to the Golan Heights.

(Sir John Rennie, Commissioner-General of UNRWA)

I hope that my report leaves the Committee in no doubt about the seriousness of the Agency's financial situation and that the disastrous consequences that may ensue if it is not remedied are fully appreciated. The causes of this situation are by now well known: inflation, aggravated by the devaluation of the United States dollar against three of the local currencies in which expenditures are incurred, and an annual rise in the school population of about 12,000. There is before the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions a report from the Administrative Committee on Co-Ordination on the effects of currency instability on United Nations organizations, but it deals only with those organizations financed by mandatory assessment and it makes no mention of the problems of organizations financed on a voluntary basis. Of these organizations, I think it fair to say that UNRWA is in the most difficult position because of the scale and nature of its operations and because of the concentration of its activities in countries or territories in which currencies did not devalue with the United States dollar or which are subject to a continuing high rate of inflation.

In Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, the Agency's costs went up at once when the dollar was devalued; in the occupied territories which have been assimilated to the Israeli economy since 1967, the Israeli pound followed the dollar, but inflation has recently been running at an annual rate of about 14 per cent. On an annual basis, the net adverse effect of the devaluation of the United States dollar on the Agency in 1973 was in excess of $3 million. I invite the attention of the Committee to paragraphs 224 to 226 of Chapter II of the report, which show in detail how expenditures have increased as a result of the factors I have mentioned. For the 1974 budget, their combined effect accounts for some $7.3 million of the increase of $8.7 million in expenditure.

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May I also invite attention to paragraphs 183 and 209 of the report, which deal with the repercussions of dollar devaluation on the Agency's provident fund scheme for its local employees. For these employees, who number over 14,000, the provident fund scheme provides their main retiring benefit. They have naturally been alarmed at the situation that has arisen, and it has caused me much concern. The International Labour Organisation's study referred to in paragraph 183 has taken place, the report and recommendations are awaited, and an early decision on them will be desirable in the interest of staff morale. The decision will not be made easier by the Agency's financial situation, but the Agency's obligations to its staff with regard to superannuation must be given proper consideration.

In circumstances in which United Nations organizations incur deficits and must seek increased income, a prompt reaction is to look for economies in expenditure. In the case of UNRWA, it must be borne in mind -- and I apologize for repeating what must be obvious -- that the Agency is engaged in the provision of services of a quasi-governmental nature which cannot simply be expanded or contracted in accordance with the flow of funds. Its major activities are not conferences, investigations or studies, and the compilation of reports, however valuable. Nor is it engaged in providing financial and technical assistance for a series of projects of limited duration that offer the possibility of early termination or of postponement at a time of financial stringency. It is entirely an operational agency, running its own services directly through its own staff, providing food, medical care and education for a community dependent on it for these services. This is what I believe distinguishes UNRWA from all other United Nations organizations, in degree if not in kind, and this is also why the precariousness of its voluntary financing must cause so much anxiety.

Paragraph 19 of the latest report of the working group on the financing of UNRWA (document A/9231 of 19 October 1973) recalls how the indirect or common costs of UNRWA's programmes have been compressed and refers to footnote 8 to paragraph 46 of the previous report of the working group to the twenty-seventh session (document A/8849) in which details are given. With

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regard to international staff, table 22 of my report shows that on 30 June 1973 they numbered only 120 out of a total staff of 14,849. Thirty-four of the international staff were provided by other United Nations organizations on a non-reimbursable basis and only 86 were thus a charge on UNRWA's budget. There is, I believe, little scope for a further reduction in the number of international staff after the substantial reduction of one-third since 1963. Indeed, the process of reduction has gone rather too far and I have been greatly concerned about the strain on the small top management of the Agency which results from the conditions in which we operate -- and I include here the strain imposed by financial conditions. I therefore recently consulted the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management and we were able to prevail on the Assistant Secretary-General for General Services, who was formerly Director of the Administrative Management Service, to pay a brief visit to Beirut and to give me the benefit of his advice on staffing and the allocation of functions at the top level. I am most grateful to the Assistant Secretary-General, Mr. Ryan, for undertaking this assignment at some personal inconvenience. I should, however, make clear that what is likely to be involved is marginal and of no financial significance in relation to the size of the Agency's budget and of its deficit.

If the deficit for 1974 cannot be eliminated by increases in contributions, there will be no real alternative to reductions in programmes, but given the size of the deficit these reductions will have to be substantial, and I must warn the Committee that the consequences will be very serious. It may appear unthinkable that at this juncture in the Middle East UNRWA should be allowed to disintegrate before the expiration of its current mandate at the end of June 1975, but this may well be the result if reductions are forced on the Agency. I have given an indication in the last sentence of paragraph 46 of the kind of reductions that will be necessary to save as much as three-quarters of the estimated deficit for 1974: the elimination of the preparatory cycle of education, that is to say, of the last three years of the normal nine years of compulsory education in the area. This reduction would affect about 56,000 children and involve the termination

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of the contracts of over 2000 teachers. To eliminate the deficit entirely will require, in addition, significant reductions in the health services.

I have explained that since ration items at present are donated, a reduction in them would release no cash and the main weight of reductions must therefore fall on the education programme as the main user of cash income. If cash were to be substituted for commodities in contributions in kind, reductions in the basic ration programme could be considered as an alternative to all or some of the reductions that would otherwise have to be made in education and health services. But if reductions in basic rations were to replace, for instance, the elimination of the preparatory cycle of education, they would have to be on a very large scale. It must not be imagined that reductions on such a scale could take place without severe hardship among the refugees, turmoil in the host countries, and adverse effects on the United Nations and the international community as a whole.

The alternative to reductions is an increase in contributions. The working group has recommended that the financing of UNRWA should remain on a voluntary basis. I understand very well why this recommendation has been made, but I hope it will be understood by the group and the Committee why I must comment that voluntary financing is a most unsatisfactory basis for running UNRWA's operations. I am sorry that the working group did not find it possible to reconsider the possibility of transferring the cost of UNRWA's international staff to the United Nations regular budget. I must confess I do not altogether understand, in view of the precedents, why there should be such a strong objection in principle. The transfer would demonstrate the interest of the United Nations as a whole in the Agency's humanitarian work; it would enable the voluntary contributions to be devoted entirely to operational programmes; and it would make a significant contribution of over $2 million towards the elimination of the deficit for 1974.

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Given the financial situation I have outlined and the consequences I foresee, what is then to be done? The Working Group, for whose support I am most grateful, has done what it could, so have my colleagues and I in UNRWA, with the help and encouragement of the Secretary-General. But we have been unsuccessful in closing the gap between income and expenditure. The forces beyond our control which make for increases in expenditure have proved too strong and so, in the aftermath of yet another war in which hundreds of millions of dollars have been dissipated in a few weeks, we must contemplate a reduction in the United Nations programme for Palestine refugees for lack of $10 million a year. It may seem unfair to put it in these terms, but the comparison is inescapable.

I have said in the final paragraph of the Introduction to my report on page 47, that I must seek and receive guidance from the General Assembly -- that is to say, in the first instance from this Committee -- whether for lack of funds I am to make reductions in programmes of the kind in view, very possibly against the wishes of the host Governments and therefore without any assurance of their full co-operation and, if not, whether I am to take an even more drastic course. These are questions I must put to the Committee. It does not seem to me proper that such decisions should be made by an appointed official. They are not simply administrative, but essentially political decisions, in view of the consequences that may follow. I must add that, as far as I am concerned, an unacceptable course would be to continue to maintain programmes in full, regardless of the financial situation, until the Agency collapsed in chaos.

It may be, of course, that out of the present tragic dangerous tangle of events in the Middle East, there will emerge in the course of the next few months the shape of a lasting settlement. It is what I am sure we all hope, but there must be few who can believe it will be lasting if it does not include a just settlement of the refugee problem, in the words of subparagraph (a) of paragraph 2 of Security Council resolution 242 (1967), for the implementation of which Security Council resolution 338 (1973) has just called with urgency. Nor, may I add, can anyone in my position fail to recognize the existence of a political dimension to the problem.

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I hope, Mr. Chairman, that you and your Committee will agree on the importance of maintaining UNRWA's programmes in the meantime and of avoiding a further grave complication of the situation and that, if you do, your Governments will provide the additional funds required, failing which, as I have said, I must have your guidance on the course I am to follow.

Mr. ARVESEN (Norway), Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency: On behalf of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, I have the honour to introduce the report of the Working Group contained in document A/9231.

The Working Group was established three years ago in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 2656 (XXV), and is composed of the following nine Member States: France, Ghana, Japan, Lebanon, Norway, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

By its resolution 2964 (XXVII) the General Assembly requested the Working Group to continue its efforts, in co-operation with the Secretary-General and the Commissioner-General, for the financing of UNRWA for a further period of one year.

The present report, A/9231, is divided into four main chapters. These are: I, Introduction; II, Activities of the Working Group; III, The financial situation of UNRWA during 1973; and IV, Concluding remarks.

I do not intend to offer any further comments on chapter I, as this chapter contains only a brief factual description of what took place during the consideration of this item in the Special Political Committee and the plenary last year, as well as an outline of the terms of reference of the Working Group.

Chapter II gives a factual resumé of the activities of the Working Group during the past year, as well as an indication of the results of the fund-raising activities undertaken on behalf of UNRWA in 1973. It is a sad fact that the results of those fund-raising activities have not been encouraging. I feel

(Mr. Arvesen, Norway)

it is my duty to draw attention to paragraph 15 of the report of the Working Group in which it is said:

"Whatever the final results of the fund-raising activities for UNRWA during 1973, the Working Group is deeply concerned about the prospect for 1974. The Commissioner-General has warned of a potential deficit of more than $10 million for 1974 and the prospect of a cash crisis at the beginning of that year. He has emphasized that UNRWA's working capital and cash resources cannot accommodate such deficits and that, unless they can be eliminated services will have to be reduced in 1974".

This brings me to chapter III of the Working Group's report. I would particularly draw the attention of the members of the Committee to the concluding paragraph of this chapter, that is paragraph 20, which reads:

(Mr. Arvesen, Norway)

"As a result of the financial crisis a threat of reduction in services has returned. Additional funds are urgently needed. Since all basic ration commodities are donated in kind, and the education programme almost entirely cash-payments, represents nearly half of the total budget, the UNRWA/UNESCO school system is in jeopardy. If the deficit for 1973 persists at the same level until the end of the year, cash in hand will be insufficient to meet requirements in January 1974 unless substantial early payments of contributions are made in that month. In any case, in view of the deficit anticipated for 1974, the respite would only be temporary." (A/9231, para. 20)

Thus the prospects for UNRWA are, at the present moment, indeed gloomy, and it is the hope of the members of the Working Group that this will now finally be recognized by Member Governments. It is with this in mind that the Working Group has formulated its brief and straightforward concluding remarks, which are to be found in chapter IV of the report. Our first conclusion is still the following:

"... as long as a just and lasting settlement of the problem of the Palestine refugees has not been achieved, UNRWA's services in the form of relief assistance, health care and education must be maintained at least at their present minimal level." (ibid., para. 21)

The Working Group's second conclusion, which is unfortunately a very gloomy one, is contained in paragraph 22 of the report:

"The Working Group has to emphasize that the financial crisis of UNRWA, particularly the prospect of a deficit of more than $10 million for 1974, is more alarming than ever before. According to information received from the Commissioner-General, the Agency would be forced to consider and eventually implement reductions in its services during 1974, unless substantial increases in voluntary contributions were forthcoming in the near future. The Working Group considers that such a course of action would be most regrettable." (ibid., para. 22)

Furthermore, the Working Group continues to believe that the continuation of the present services rendered by UNRWA is dependent on voluntary contributions from Governments. However, and this is the Working Group's main conclusion which is to be found in paragraph 24 of the report:

(Mr. Arvesen, Norway)

"... in order to ensure that no reduction in UNRWA's present services has to be envisaged in the immediate future -- if that is the wish of the General Assembly -- the Working Group is convinced that Member Governments, and particularly those Governments which have not contributed in the past and those Governments which have so far contributed inadequately, must be willing to reconsider their position and contribute generously."

(ibid., para. 24)

Consequently, I would like to reiterate what I have had occasion to emphasize earlier before this Committee, that the provision of relief assistance, health services and educational facilities to the Palestine refugees in the Middle East is a humanitarian task which should be considered the main responsibility of all Members of the United Nations. It must once again be stressed that UNRWA's cash position remains precarious, and the Working Group would express the sincere hope that Governments at the forthcoming Pledging Conference through their contributions will show the necessary political will to redress the chronic budgetary and financial crisis which UNRWA is still facing. In the final analysis, it must be clearly understood and recognized that the future of UNRWA is in the hands of all the Governments represented in this Committee. If it is still the wish of the General Assembly that UNRWA's services should be continued without any reductions, it is imperative that Member Governments -- and all of them, not just a few -- follow up their verbal and political support for a just cause with hard cash.

Mr. OLCAY (Turkey), Chairman of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency: Once again we are dealing with the humanitarian aspect of a political problem which has persisted in the Middle East for so long. Only too recently the area has witnessed tragic events that inevitably added to the human suffering. These have further complicated the already inextricable situation in the Middle East and increased the complexities of the problems with which we have to deal under the present item on our agenda.

(Mr. Olcay, Turkey)

While we do hope that enough grounds may be found finally for a just and lasting peace to emerge in the Middle East, our task of maintaining UNRWA's services, at least at their present minimal levels, until such a solution including the just settlement of the problem of the Palestine refugees is achieved, is not diminished.

Unfortunately, at this very crucial stage in the history of the Middle East, we find ourselves with a large deficit in the Agency's 1973 budget, as well as an even larger prospective one for 1974. Unless a well-justified and well-deserved unanimous response in the form of voluntary contributions is forthcoming soon, I am afraid future historians will not be able to explain the frustration of the invaluable efforts made in this noble endeavour by anything less than "the irresponsible and callous indifference prevailing at the time".

I would not like to think, even for a moment, that such is the case. I am sure, however, that it will be a great pity if, under the direction of such an able and dedicated man as Sir John Rennie and his admirable staff and at such a crucial stage in history, the Agency is forced to cut down its basic services to one and a half million people. We are indeed grateful to the Commissioner-General and his staff for the determination with which they carried on the Agency's activities over the years, utilizing the limited means available to the optimum extent. But, in all fairness, we cannot expect the Commissioner-General to assume also the burden of the heavy responsibility now facing us. This is our responsibility.

In paragraph 47 of his report, speaking of the prospect of having to reduce services, Sir John Rennie states:

> "In the Commissioner-General's opinion, a decision with such serious political consequences and such ominous implications for peace and security is not an administrative matter to be dealt with by an appointed official. It is a decision that ought to be taken at a governmental level, and in the absence of a governing body for UNRWA with executive responsibilities, the Commissioner-General must seek and receive guidance and directions from the General Assembly." (A/9013, para. 47)

I could not agree more with the Commissioner-General. And our task is to provide such guidance as to preclude the unfortunate necessity of cutting down the Agency's services. The unhampered continuation of this programme is the common responsibility of all Members of the United Nations.

(Mr. Olcay, Turkey)

The Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, of which I have the honour to serve as Chairman, has continued its fund-raising activities in co-operation with the Secretary-General and the Commissioner-General throughout the year, as described in detail in its report presented a moment ago to the Committee by its Rapporteur. Except for some individually notable results, however, the general responsiveness to the Working Group's efforts has not been an encouraging and rewarding one so far. If the General Assembly wishes the Agency to continue its services, as I am sure it does, it must provide it with the necessary means. Since no acceptable and feasible alternative to voluntary contributions has been found, it is only natural for the international community to look upon, first and foremost, those Governments which have either not contributed to the Agency in the past or whose contributions have been inadequate. This, of course, does not mean that additional and increased contributions from other Governments are not expected and appreciated. In fact a few -- very few -- among those already contributing have given encouraging promises. But the need for all countries, large and small, rich and poor, to contribute to this noble endeavour, be it even in a symbolic way, is still there.

The challenge is a worthy and unanimous one. So must be our resolve and our responsiveness. Let us not forget that no segment of the international community can be exempt from the blame that the future generations may place on us. Let us now unite, as we undoubtedly have the will to do, to find a way to continue this humanitarian undertaking which affects the lives of one and a half million human beings and the future of more than a quarter of a million school children.

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